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SUBJECT: UKRAINE'S FLU LEVELS SIMILAR TO OTHER AFFECTED COUNTRIES

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11. (SBU) Summary. While the flu epidemic is spreading across Ukraine, public panic levels appear to have dropped slightly, as some rationality returned to the discussion. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), there has been one officially confirmed H1N1 death and 14 non-lethal H1N1 cases. The number of flu- and pneumonia-related deaths meanwhile exceeded 80, Deputy Minister of Health and Chief Sanitary Doctor Oleksandr Bilovol said in a press conference on November 4. Several countries including Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and Georgia pledged assistance to Ukraine to fight the outbreak and provided medicine and H1N1 testing kits. At the same time, Slovakia closed two of its five border crossings with Ukraine and other countries announced stricter border controls to prevent the flu from spreading into their territories. To combat the virus, the Verkhovna Rada (Ukraine's parliament) approved amendments to the budget on Tuesday to allocate UAH 1 billion (\$125 million) to the Ministry of Health. However, questions about the funding source quickly arose, fueling debate about the politicization of the epidemic. End Summary.

ONE OFFICIALLY CONFIRMED H1N1 DEATH

12. (SBU) In a briefing for the diplomatic community on November 3, the WHO country office head Igor Pokanevych said there has been one officially confirmed H1N1 death in Ukraine and 14 non-lethal cases of H1N1. Yet, despite this relatively low number of confirmed cases, the WHO said in a statement that most flu cases in Ukraine can be assumed to be H1N1, "as the pandemic virus has rapidly become the dominant influenza strain worldwide." According to preliminary findings by the WHO, however, nothing indicates that Ukraine's flu outbreak is different from those experienced in other countries. A special WHO team, which arrived in Ukraine on November 2 at the invitation of the government, is currently working closely with the Ministry of Health to study the outbreak and take adequate measures to protect the population.

VACCINES AND SURGICAL MASKS

13. (SBU) According to WHO's Pokanevych, two H1N1 vaccines, produced by Russia and Canada, are currently undergoing a registration process in Ukraine and could be available in December 2009-January 12010. Ukraine is also expected to procure 700,000 doses of Tamiflu from Swiss drug manufacturer Hoffmann-La Roche Ltd, in addition to 300,000 doses already purchased (ref C). Prime Minister Tymoshenko also reportedly tasked Foreign Minister Poroshenko with procuring additional medication from international companies "at a special pandemic price." In a more populist move, Tymoshenko said that all Ukrainian will be provided with a surgical mask within one week, according to Interfax news service.

STATE-RUN DRUGSTORES

¶4. (SBU) Ostensibly to ensure availability and affordability of medicine, Tymoshenko suggested that a state network of drugstores be created and asked the government to draft a plan to this effect by November 11. The Prime Minister proposed that owners of drugstores engaged in "profiteering" be criminally prosecuted and the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) reportedly closed several pharmacies which failed to carry the recommended assortment of medications, according to First Deputy Health Minister Vasyl Lazorishinets.

CAN THE NATIONAL BANK PAY FOR ANTI-FLU PROGRAM?

¶5. (SBU) The Verkhovna Rada overwhelmingly approved amendments to the 2009 budget on November 3 to allocate UAH 1 billion (\$125 million) to the Ministry of Health to combat the flu. According to the amendments, the funds are to be provided by the National Bank of Ukraine (NBU) and redirected from the state program for financing Ukraine's preparations for the Euro-2012 soccer championship. [Note: These outlays are to be financed from the NBU's "future" profit earned in 2009. The NBU however estimates that its 2009 profit will be about UAH 608 million (\$76 million) and repeatedly spoke out against an advance payment to the budget. End Note.] According to NBU Deputy Governor Shapovalov, "it is up to the government how to use the UAH 608 million both to pay for the Euro 2012 Championship and the anti-flu campaign."

INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE

¶6. (SBU) The WHO has donated 61,000 treatment courses of Tamiflu to Ukraine and provided Ukrainian laboratories with H1N1 test kits.

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According to the WHO, the Ukrainian government has also reached an agreement with Indian pharmaceutical companies on the supply of medicines and medical equipment to Ukraine. Slovakia, Poland, Hungary and Georgia have already provided assistance to Ukraine, including H1N1 testing kits and antiviral drugs. China and Singapore have reportedly agreed to render expert assistance to Ukraine. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) has been tasked with coordinating all international assistance.

BORDER SITUATION

¶7. (U) Slovakia said on November 3 it closed two of its five border crossings with Ukraine to prevent the spread of H1N1 into its territory. Russia boosted controls on its borders with Ukraine and, according to news reports, announced it would quarantine people with severe flu symptoms. There have also been unconfirmed press reports of stricter border regimes and potential closures at the Ukrainian border with Moldova, Romania and Poland.

COMMENT

¶8. (SBU) The panic level in the media appears to have diminished slightly, due to the arrival of the special WHO team and a more unified message from the government. The public seems calmed by reports that, based on preliminary findings, the WHO team has confirmed Ukraine is experiencing a flu epidemic at a level comparable to other affected countries, including the U.S. End Comment.

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